

**AMENDMENTS TO THE CLAIMS**

1-17. (Cancelled)

18. (Previously Presented) A distributed system for issuing printed objects, comprising:

a central control unit;

a plurality of local terminals for issuing the printed objects, the local terminals located at different geographic locations, wherein each local terminal includes a memory storing a clear code and a protected code;

a communication and control network;

a plurality of smart cards assigned to operators of the local terminals to activate and enable the local terminals to issue the printed objects, wherein each smart card includes a secret key and a personal identification code;

wherein each of said plurality of local terminals includes a memory storing an initialization program that when executed causes a terminal of the plurality of terminals to perform the steps of:

generating a unique fingerprint of the local terminal by combining the clear code and the protected code;

sending, to a smart card of the plurality of smart cards inserted in the local terminal, the generated fingerprint of the local terminal;

generating a signed fingerprint by signing the fingerprint of the local terminal with the secret key of the smart card;

replacing the personal identification code in the smart card with a new personal identification code in the memory of the smart card;

sending the signed fingerprint to the central control unit.

19. (Cancelled)

20. (Previously Presented) The system of claim 18, wherein the initialization program is adapted to execute following a customization step that associates the given smart card with a given account.

21. (Cancelled)

22. (Previously Presented) The system of claim 18, wherein the initialization program is adapted to record the given smart card on the central control unit and enable the smart card for use with the given local terminal.

23. (Cancelled)

24. (Previously Presented) The system of claim 18, wherein the initialization program includes a double, asymmetrical key algorithm that signs the fingerprint of the given local terminal.

25. (Previously Presented) The system of claim 18, wherein the initialization program comprises a protected, non-modifiable, machine program installed on each of the local terminals.

26. (Previously Presented) The system of claim 18, wherein the initialization program is adapted to execute upon insertion of an uninitialized smart card into one of the local terminals.

27. (Previously Presented) The system of claim 18, wherein the printed objects are selected from the group consisting of postage stamps, revenue stamps, stamped titles, and labels.

28. (Previously Presented) The system of claim 18, wherein the given local terminal and the given smart card are adapted to perform local functions concerning issuance of the printed objects autonomously of the central control unit, and further wherein the given local terminal is adapted to transfer data relating to the local functions to the central control unit.

29. (Previously Presented) A method for issuing printed objects, comprising:

providing a central control unit;

providing a plurality of local terminals for issuing the printed objects, the local terminals located at different geographic locations, wherein each local terminal includes a memory storing a clear code and a protected code;

providing a communication and control network;

providing a plurality of smart cards assigned to operators of the local terminals to activate

and enable the local terminals to issue the printed objects, wherein each smart card includes a secret key and a personal identification code; and

initializing a smart card of the plurality of smart cards for use with a corresponding local terminal following insertion of the smart card in the local terminal, wherein the initializing step comprises:

generating, by the local terminal, a unique fingerprint by combining the clear code and the protected code,

sending by the local terminal to the smart card inserted in the local terminal, the generated fingerprint of the local terminal,

generating, by the smart card, a signed fingerprint by signing the fingerprint of the local terminal with the secret key of the smart card,

replacing, by the local terminal, the personal identification code in the smart card with a new personal identification code in the memory of the smart card, and

sending by the smart card, the fingerprint signed by the smart card to the central control unit.

30. (Cancelled)

31. (New) A distributed system for issuing printed objects, comprising:

a plurality of local terminals for issuing the printed objects, the local terminals located at different geographical locations, wherein each local terminal includes a memory storing a clear

code and a protected code;

a plurality of smart cards assigned to operators of the local terminals to activate and enable the local terminals to issue the printed objects, wherein each smart card includes a secret key and a personal identification code;

wherein each of said plurality of local terminals includes a memory storing an initialization program that when executed causes a terminal of the plurality of terminals to perform the steps of:

generating a unique fingerprint of the local terminal by combining the clear code and the protected code,

sending, to a smart card of the plurality of smart cards inserted in the local terminal, the generated fingerprint of the local terminal,

generating a signed fingerprint by signing the fingerprint of the local terminal with the secret key of the smart card,

replacing the personal identification code in the smart card with a new personal identification code in the memory of the smart card,

sending the signed fingerprint to a central control unit.